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SUBJECT: FEMALE ECISION IN BURKINA FASO

¶1. Summary: Burkina Fao has attempted to eradicate the practice of femle excision for over fifty years and officially outawed the practice over a decade ago; however, th prevalence rate among girls and women has not canged. In fact, the Government of Burkina Fas (GOBF) recently announced that circumcisers and supporters of excision have developed a strategy to thwart the law by turning their razors to girls under the age of five. Recent attempts to attack the demand for excision with information campaigns are yielding some encouraging results. But Burkina Faso's efforts to eradicate excision will not be fruitful unless it starts to enforce its own laws by bringing circumcisers and supporters of excision to justice. End Summary.

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Background  
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¶2. In Burkina Faso, excision is a cultural practice that is attributed to fertility, purity and loyalty, and it is practiced equally among Christians, Muslims and animists. The procedure makes young girls eligible for marriage and gives circumcisers enhanced status in their communities. In addition to the prestige, excision is a lucrative business for the female circumcisers and their families. Circumcisers often pass their skills from mother to daughter, assuring that families keep their social and economic status in society for years to come.

¶3. Early attempts by French religious leaders and post-independence political leaders to eliminate excision met stiff cultural opposition. In the early 1950s, describing the practice as "barbaric," French Catholic priests threatened to permanently excommunicate members who excised their daughters. The majority of the population, however, dismissed the church's effort as a colonial attempt to rid Burkina Faso of its culture and values. In 1960, President Morris Yameogo, Burkina Faso's first president after independence, attempted to outlaw excision by portraying it as a practice that stymied development and violated human rights. However, Yameogo quickly abandoned the effort when confronted with vocal opposition from local elders. Finally in 1996, Burkina Faso outlawed female excision, making the practice punishable by up to 10 years in prison and US\$1500 in fines.

¶4. However, over the past decade, Burkina Faso has not seen a statistically significant decrease in the excision prevalence rate. The overall rate among all ages in Burkina Faso remains seventy-three percent today compared to seventy-six percent in 1998. In addition, in January, the GOBF acknowledged that there has actually been an increase in circumcisions among girls younger than five because circumcisers are turning their razors to younger girls. They prefer younger children because it is easy to hide babies' screams from unsuspecting neighbors and law enforcement personnel during excision ceremonies. The percentage of excisions performed on girls younger than five years old has increased from twenty percent in 1998 to thirty-one percent in 2003.

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Challenges to Eradicating Excision  
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15. One of the challenges to eradicating excision is the failure to reach the right stakeholders including men, religious leaders and political leaders. Circumcision of girls in Burkina Faso rarely takes place without the permission of fathers. However, portraying circumcision as a "women's issue" has led to the exclusion of important stakeholders and decision makers. Furthermore, studies show that anti-excision messages are more likely to be received positively if it originated from a local leader, but mayors and parliamentary representatives are often reluctant to advocate for the eradication of excision for fear of losing elections. Moreover, Burkina Faso's effort to eradicate excision has placed greater emphasis on the supply side of the practice as opposed to curbing the demand for the service. For example, to discourage women from performing circumcisions, Burkina Faso organized several "alternative employment programs," which provided circumcisers with training to gain new skills that would eventually enable them to engage in alternative income generating activities. However, an evaluation of these programs revealed that they had missed their target audience and had enrolled mostly non-practitioners who were just looking for job training. On rare occasions when circumcisers stopped the practice, the demand for services in some villages produced new providers, thwarting the small gains made by the programs.

16. Lack of funding is also a hindrance to the government's efforts to end female excision. In 2008, the National Committee against Excision only received \$60,000 from the state's budget. As a result, the Committee relies heavily on volunteers to help educate the population and enforce the law. For example, even though the GOBF has a toll free call center that can be used to report a crime related to excision, investigations are often carried out by volunteers because the Committee does not have the resources to hire

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law enforcement officials. The lack of gendarmerie presence in remote villages also contributes to the problem. There are only 22 gendarmerie brigades in Burkina Faso's 46 provinces, and arresting circumcisers or investigating crimes involving excision does not rank among their highest priorities. As a result, residents of large cities often go to remote villages to have their daughters circumcised in order to avoid being caught.

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Renewed Effort and Commitment  
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17. Recently, in an effort to reach audiences in remote villages, the GOBF has started training groups of men and women to carry out information campaigns throughout the country. Through this program, the GOBF, with assistance from international partners, has conducted campaigns in 1,149 villages throughout the country and educated villagers about the relationship between excision and human rights, explained the negative health consequences of excisions and encouraged villagers to abandon the practice. The campaigns included religious leaders and elders in an attempt to include as many stake holders in the effort as possible. To this end, the Government of Japan has recently announced its intention to give \$2.7 million to the World Bank over next seven years to work with communities and NGOs in Burkina Faso to conduct similar campaigns in additional villages to reduce both the demand and supply side of excision.

18. According to the World Bank's Health Specialist Tshiya Subayi, there is an effort to change the context within which excision is discussed. Discussing excision uniquely as a women's rights or a reproductive health issue excludes a large segment of the population. As a result, the World Bank is currently working on establishing a link between excision and economic development. It costs the government more money to provide prenatal medical services to excised than to non-excised women and infant mortality rates among circumcised women are dramatically higher than non-excised mothers. Ms. Subayi believes that establishing a link between excision and economic development could give government officials the incentive for stronger political will to end the practice.

19. While First Lady Chantal Compaore has remained the Honorary

President of the Permanent Secretariat since its creation, she has recently taken a more vocal and visible role in the Committee to end the practice of excision. In addition to chairing anti-excision campaign activities and recording public service announcements, she is currently serving as the Honorary Ambassador to Inter-African effort to eradicate female excision. Her visible role in the Committee has led to an increase in public awareness of the issue. Furthermore, in addition to running an aggressive public awareness campaign on TV and radio stations in several languages throughout the country, the GOBF is considering adding lessons about excision in school to educate the youth about its detrimental effects.

¶10. Comment: Even though the GOBF has increased its efforts to carry out more information campaigns targeting excision in Burkina Faso, it is unlikely to see a change unless it begins to enforce the law against the parents who seek to circumcise their daughters and the women that provide excision services. Sensitization campaigns and establishing links between excision and economic development will not make a difference unless the population is convinced that there are legal consequences for breaking the law.

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